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Statement from the Brussels conference on the Nineveh Plain

By present Chaldean/Syriac/Assyrian political parties (30.06.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2sHPkIM>

Throughout history, the Chaldean/Syriac/Assyrian people have faced relentless persecution which has tested the limits of our ability to survive in our ancestral homeland.

Since the 2003 invasion alone, we've seen our numbers decline from 1.5 million to fewer than 250,000 today.

When ISIS began their Genocide against our people in 2014 we were forced to confront the genuine possibility that our time in the lands which we have inhabited since time immemorial was coming to an end.

This week, nearly 3 years since the ISIS invasion of the Nineveh Plain, we the parties representing the Chaldean/Assyrian/Syriac people in Iraq, along with our church leaders and NGO's, have gathered in Brussels to find consensus on a unified policy representing the legitimate demands of our people to remain in our ancestral homeland.

After a long and often contentious process of negotiations, we have agreed upon a set of policies and principles which reflect the legitimate demands of the Chaldean/Syriac/Assyrian people for selfsecurity and self-governance.

When we asked Lars Adaktusson to host an international conference we did so in order to put an end to years of disagreements and political divisions which severely restricted our ability to move forward on the core principles to which we all ascribed.

This consensus policy puts to rest, once and for all, any confusion or equivocation regarding the demand of the Chaldean/Syriac/Assyrian people of the Nineveh Plain.

In January 2014, the Iraqi Council of Ministers adopted a motion to create three new provinces, including one in the Nineveh Plain.

Our policy makes clear our expectation that this resolution be implemented, with the eventual goal of the creation of a region as enumerated in the Iraqi Constitution.

There is a clear legal and moral precedent and process for realizing this policy, and we were pleased to hear the representative of the Iraqi government confirm their support for our ambitions.

We welcome the clear support for autonomy from the representative of the Kurdistan Regional Government. We also express our deep gratitude to the KRG for all its efforts to shelter our people during one of its biggest disasters.

We are eternally grateful to Mr. Adaktusson for believing in our cause even when some in our own community regretfully attempted to obstruct the process.

We are pleased to have the opportunity in Brussels to present our unified policy to the EU parliament, US Department of State, United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, and other world leaders.

We once again thank Mr. Adaktusson, the EPP, the European Union, the US government, and all those who believed in our ability to find consensus.

Now we need your support to realize this policy. Make no mistake that this historic moment is not the end of our cooperation.

We will take this consensus to global leaders in every corner of the world, from Washington, to Brussels, to the United Nations and everywhere in between.

We will accept no less than our absolute right to shape the future for ourselves, our children and grandchildren.

Finally, we invite everyone to endorse the Brussels Position Paper.

Thank you.

The Iraqi Government opens up for autonomy in Northern Iraq

By Nuri Kino

Huffington Post (30.06.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2sBjDWa> - On the 29th June, at a well-attended conference at the European Parliament in Brussels, entitled "A Future for Christians in Iraq", Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriac political parties produced a position paper, which outlines their desire to establish self-governance.

On January 21st 2014, the Iraq Council of Ministers approved a plan to establish three new provinces in Iraq. One province would be in Fallujah, in central Iraq; a second would be in north Iraq, in Tuz Khormato; the third would also be in north Iraq, in the Nineveh Plain.

In the summer of 2014, the terrorist group ISIS first invaded Iraq's second largest city of Mosul. A few weeks later the entire Nineveh Plain that had the largest population of Assyrians/Chaldeans/Syriacs was also invaded. ISIS had threatened to completely eradicate Christianity in Iraq, as well as other religious and ethnic minorities such as Yazidis, Shabaks and Turkmens. The Iraqi army and the Kurdish Peshmerga abandoned the Nineveh Plain. Hundreds of thousands fled the area, which was completely emptied in just a few days. Others were kidnapped. Little girls were sold as sex slaves. And even more were slaughtered. Even today some families are still searching for loved ones.

ISIS fulfilled the ideology that for a decade tried to eradicate both the religious and the ethnic existence of the Assyrian/Chaldeans/Syriacs. Churches and monasteries were destroyed along with ancient Assyrian and Babylon cities in Mosul and the Nineveh Plain. They also destroyed Muslim (both Sunni and Shia) mosques and Yazidi temples. A full scale genocide took place. Since then many parliaments around the world, including the European, British and U.S. Congress have acknowledged that the persecution fulfills the UN resolution criteria for genocide.

"Last October, we were in Northern Iraq after having had successfully passed two resolutions: one to have the genocide recognized by the European Parliament and the second to get support for the self-governance of the Nineveh Plain," says Charlie Weimers, chief of staff for Member of the European Parliament Lars Adaktusson.

Weimers continues becoming emotional as he tells us about partaking in mass at Syriac-Catholic cathedral in Baghdede (Qarakosh) in the Nineveh plain directly after it was liberated from ISIS. "I was close to tears when I saw the destruction of the church, it was burned and I recall seeing statues being used as target practice for ISIS fighters. They had decapitated statues, torn out eyes of angels and saints."

After their trip to recently liberated towns and villages of the Nineveh Plain the delegation drove back to Ankawa, outside Erbil to meet the political parties of Assyrians/Chaldeans/Syriacs.

"They supported the resolution which had passed in the European Parliament and they asked us to host an international conference to highlight the plight of victims of genocide. They signed a letter; all the ten major Christians parties."

A week before the conference took place, Assyrian Democratic Movement and two other political parties along with two churches pulled out. The organizers were accused of "having a Kurdish agenda" and working to get "the Nineveh Plain annexed to the Kurdistan region of Iraq". The accusations were based on a draft of the policy position paper.

However, at the conference, the political parties in attendance made it clear that the only solution is a self-governing province. They referred to the Iraqi constitution and the right to establish their region in the Nineveh plain with their own police force, security force, healthcare and education and justice system.

The Kurdish regional government's representative Hoshyar Siwaily, head of the foreign relations office of the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), said in his speech that it's entirely up to the people to decide whether they want to join KRG or self-govern within Iraq.

Lars Adaktusson asked the Iraqi ambassador to the European Union, Jawad al-Hindawy, what the Iraqi government's stance was. He answered:

"This issue will be solved through negotiation and dialogue" and also stated solution may not be a province but rather a regional government since Iraq is a federation.

On the last day of the conference Adaktusson started with saying, "Today ISIS was declared defeated by the Iraqi government. That's to add to this historical moment".

After his speech, Adaktusson was invited to go to Baghdad in the fall and the political parties signed the policy position paper (See http://adaktusson.eu/cms/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Untitled_20170630_132901.pdf). But not before they thanked Adaktusson for having succeeded in making them cooperate on a their final demands for the Nineveh Plain. Another common issue was that they hoped that the parties who had pulled out of the conference would join the cooperation again.

The personal representative Fawzi Hariri of president Barzani, KRG, opposed the press release that was read. He claimed that he was disappointed with it since KRG wasn't thanked: "The Iraqi government will not do anything for you, so yes we are disappointed with the wording. If you are willing to make a statement and thanking the Iraqi government you should also thank the Kurdistan regional government."

The final press release can be read at: <http://adaktusson.eu/cms/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Statement-from-the-Brussels-Conference.pdf>

The conference ended with a standing ovations for the representatives who signed the policy position paper, all who helped to implement the request for an international conference, the governments which supported it and Lars Adaktusson himself.

The political parties also made it clear that they "don't want a Berlin wall in the Nineveh Plain" meaning that the parties who have signed will not accept the region to be split between Baghdad and Erbil.

Below are some of the other participants of the conference:

The Iraqi Government

The European Delegation for Iraq

The Kurdish Regional Government

The US Government

Patriarch of the Syrian Orthodox Church

Patriarch of the Syrian Catholic Church

Iraqi Christians targeted for deportation face 'death sentence' in Iraq, lawyers say

The Guardian (15.06.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2se0Gp5> - Iraqis are being swept up in immigration raids across the US and targeted for deportation by the Trump administration, in a crackdown attorneys and advocates described as a "death sentence" for members of Iraq's Christian minority.

US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (Ice) arrested more than 200 Iraqi nationals over the weekend who have been the subject of deportation orders following criminal convictions or pending criminal charges.

One hundred and fourteen people were detained in Detroit alone, most of whom are members of Iraq's Chaldean minority – which, like other Christian groups, has been targeted for persecution by Islamic State and other jihadist groups.

Najah Konja, 55, who was arrested in Detroit on Sunday morning, immigrated to the US with his family in 1977. No other relatives remain in Iraq, according to his brother, Shoki "Steve" Konja.

"What is he going to do there?" Steve Konja, a US citizen, told the Guardian. "Basically, they are sentencing him to death."

Konja said his brother does not speak Arabic, and that the last member of their family to leave Iraq was kidnapped twice and held for ransom because of his relatives in the US. "The government of Iraq cannot protect and defend its own citizens – let alone a bunch of Christians coming from the US," Konja said.

These concerns were echoed by advocates including the [Minority Humanitarian Foundation](#) (MHF), which provides aid to Iraqi minorities. MHF planned to file a lawsuit with the American Civil Liberties Union to stop the deportation of Chaldeans to Iraq.

"Donald Trump has essentially given these Christians a death sentence," said MHF founder and president, Mark Arabo.

Last year, then US secretary of state John Kerry said a genocide was occurring against Christians in Iraq, though international courts have not officially given the violence there that designation.

Ice spokeswoman Gillian Christensen said an "overwhelming majority" of those arrested were convicted for crimes including "homicide, rape, aggravated assault, kidnapping, burglary, drug trafficking, robbery, sex assault, weapons violations and other offenses".

In Detroit, Christensen said the operation "was specifically conducted to address the very real public safety threat represented by the criminal aliens arrested".

But community advocates scoffed at that claim, arguing many of the charges were handed down decades ago and those convicted had served their sentences for the crimes.

Konja served 23 years in prison for drug charges and was released in 2009. In prison, he pursued his GED and helped teach other inmates, his brother said.

For the past eight years, he has worked at a large chain store where he was a director of operations, overseeing 400 employees. "He completely turned his life around," his brother said.

Steve Konaj said the arrest has left him disillusioned with the country he considers his home.

"This is not United States," he said. "I've been here 40 years. I believe in the dream, I believe in the constitution. I love it to death. I'm willing to sacrifice myself if needed, but to tell these people: 'You committed a crime 30 years ago, when you were 19, 20 – now you have to pay again for that mistake.'"

Iraq had previously not cooperated with US deportation efforts but the two countries negotiated a new policy in March after Trump issued a travel ban for citizens of seven Muslim-majority countries including Iraq.

The ban was revised after it was struck down in a federal court; the new ban – which is also the subject of a legal challenge – no longer includes Iraq and removes language that prioritized entry for religious minorities, including Christians, from these countries.

The executive order said the rules for Iraq had changed because "the Iraqi government has expressly undertaken steps to enhance travel documentation, information sharing, and the return of Iraqi nationals subject to final orders of removal".

Another focus of the recent sweep was Nashville, Tennessee, where at least 30 Iraqis were arrested, said local immigration attorney Andrew Free.

Unlike Detroit, Ice raids there have hit Kurds, members of the largest ethnic minority in Iraq, who have been fighting Isis alongside US soldiers in Syria.

Nashville has the largest population of Kurds in the US. Attorneys and advocates there said the Ice raids began by targeting people with criminal histories early last week. Then Ice conducted sweeps of predominantly Kurdish neighborhoods, going door-to-door starting at 6am.

In response, Drost Kokoye, who is Kurdish and a founder of the American Muslim Advisory Council, helped set up a hotline for people to call when Ice knocks on their door. She said the hotline has been "buzzing" every day from 6-9am since last week.

The sweep has had a chilling effect on the community. Kokoye said that at Nashville's Kurdish mosque the daily breaking of the fast, iftar, the crowd is about a quarter of what it was at the beginning of Ramadan, which started before the Ice raids. She said: "People are terrified, people are rattled, people don't feel safe in their homes."

Iraq Christians returning home face many hurdles

By World Watch Monitor (14.06.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2tpg55j> - Three years since the northern Iraqi city of Mosul was taken by Islamic State militants, Iraqi government forces have been able to reclaim a large part of the city, allowing Chaldean Catholic Patriarch of Baghdad Louis Raphael Sako to visit several churches and monasteries.

While there is still fierce fighting in Mosul, forcing more than 10,000 Iraqis from their homes in the last couple of days alone, the international community is talking about resettling people in the areas liberated from IS.

Christians have been encouraged to return to their villages and there have been several reports of them doing so. Earlier this year, the head of Aid to the Church in Need's Middle East project, Fr Andrzej Halemba, said the proportion of Christians wanting to return to their villages had risen to "more than 50%" and that this number "keeps increasing".

It is vital to keep Christians in Iraq because they "are, and have always been, the founders of educational and health care institutions" in the region, US-based bishop Bawai Soro told the Catholic News Agency after a press conference on Capitol Hill, Washington D.C, last

week. He was there to advocate for legislation that would let the US distribute humanitarian aid directly to churches in Iraq and Syria.

Bishop Soro also said that Christian communities in Iraq would remain in the region – as they have done, despite “centuries of persecution” – provided their material needs are met.

World Watch Monitor has previously highlighted some of the initiatives set up to facilitate the return of Christians eager to rebuild their homes, and the ways in which IDPs (internally displaced people) have sought to support themselves.

'No longer a home'

But Bishop Soro's comments came just a few days after the launch of a report that estimated that 50-80% of the Christian populations of Iraq and Syria have left since the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011, adding that many have no desire to return.

The arrival of IS was only the “tipping point” of a trend already gathering pace, as Christians experienced an “overall loss of hope for a safe and secure future”, according to the report, produced by Christian charities Open Doors, Served and Middle East Concern.

It noted that, for the Christians who have settled elsewhere, there is “little incentive” to return, with several saying “the Middle East is no longer a home for Christians”. Less than half of the people displaced from the Nineveh Plains, just outside Mosul, are expected to return, according to the report.

'Right to return'

In a policy paper released alongside the report, the three charities called on the EU to help establish an “accountability mechanism” to deal with incidents of religious and ethnic persecution and discrimination in Iraq and Syria, to ensure the future safety and security of Christians in the region.

A recent video showing a call for jihad from a Muslim cleric has caused anger among Iraqi Christians. The undated footage shows Sheikh Alaa Al-Mousawi, head of the Shia Endowment, a government body that looks after Iraq's Shia holy sites, describing Christians as “infidels”, saying “either they should convert to Islam, or else they are killed or they pay the *jizya*” (a tax on non-Muslims).

“Security concerns remain an issue that has not been adequately addressed. In response to this failing, NGOs continue to call upon international institutions to establish safe zones in Nineveh Plains,” writes human rights advocate Ewelina Ochab.

She points out that the guarantee of a “right to return”, as enshrined in international law, “means nothing if returnees are left unprotected on returning to their region”. However, she notes the difficulty of achieving this, saying: “It takes time, money, and effort for liberated areas to be safe for refugees and IDPs to return. According to a report ... in nine Nineveh Plains towns over 12,000 houses were vandalised by Daesh. The cost of rebuilding the towns is in excess of \$200 million.”

'Protected enclave'

Last month, the Chaldean Catholic Archbishop of Erbil, Bashar Warda, told World Watch Monitor about the launch of an ambitious US\$262 million “Marshall Plan” for the reconstruction of destroyed homes in Christian-majority villages.

As for the future of Christians in northern Iraq, he said they had to be realistic about establishing a “protected enclave”, as the international community is “not going to send troops to protect Christians and make them more vulnerable. We have to work our way with all our neighbours – Sunni, Shabak, Shia, Kurds”.

But in September last year, a majority of Iraq’s Members of Parliament rejected the idea to set aside safe areas for Christians and other indigenous minorities in the Nineveh Plains because it would be “dividing the country and causing chaos”.

Iraqi senior cleric shown calling for Christians to ‘convert, pay tax or be killed’

By World Watch Monitor (14.06.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2sd1A5n> - A video showing a call for jihad from a senior Iraqi Shi’ite cleric has caused anger among Iraqi Christians.

The undated footage shows Sheikh Alaa Al-Mousawi, head of the Shia Endowment, a government body that looks after Iraq’s Shia holy sites, describing Christians as “infidels”, saying “either they should convert to Islam, or else they are killed or they pay the *jizya*” [a tax on non-Muslims]. When challenged, Al-Mousawi was reported to have said the video dates back three years. Other local reports say that the video is more recent.

Almost 200 Iraqi Christian families have filed a lawsuit against the government-appointed cleric on charges of “incitement of sectarian violence against Christians”. Meanwhile, Al-Mousawi has sent a delegation from the Endowment to the Babylonian Christian Movement to mediate the lawsuit.

The statement is a chilling reminder of when IS captured towns in the Nineveh plains in June 2014, reinstating the same traditional Islamic ultimatum to Christians.

“Al-Mousawi’s call reminds us of the extremist rhetoric issued by radical groups like IS,” said Henriette Kats, an analyst for the World Watch Research Unit of Open Doors International which works to support the global Church under pressure.

“There are many other extremist Islamic groups active in Iraq which target local religious minorities, including Christians. However, for such incitements to come from senior government officials is rare and is all the more shocking.”

The news will disappoint displaced Iraqi Christians told by the authorities it is now safe to return to homes in the Nineveh plains liberated from IS. To many Iraqi Christians living in the capital, Baghdad, it is further confirmation that they must stay and continue working in dangerous places.

Living under threat has always been a reality for Joseph, an Iraqi church leader.

Just three weeks after his wedding in 2007 a bomb exploded in the car he was driving.

“All of a sudden, there was this huge explosion. I was totally confused and I couldn’t see anymore. I heard a woman screaming: ‘This man is dying,’ and I thought: ‘This is it, I am dying.’ But somehow I got out of the car.”

Joseph escaped unscathed. With his sight recovered, he saw that all that was left of the car was his driving seat.

"I found pieces of glass in my hair and four parts of the bomb in my scarf.

"God encouraged me that day," he said. "And when, seven years later, IS took control of big parts of Iraq and Muslims started coming to Christ, I understood why He wanted me to stay. So when someone asks me why I remain with my family in Baghdad, I tell them this story. I know God is with me each moment."

Now married with two children, Joseph said violence in Baghdad is random – people in the wrong place at the wrong time. But he chooses to stay in the city, helping people with their new-found faith.

New believers bring 'new culture' to church

"We have new blood, new believers. That is a challenge because it brings a new culture to the church. Recently a man converted [from Islam]. He is married to three wives and has children with all of them. He asked me what to do. I told him to keep them, what else could I say? This is only one of the problems we are facing because of the new converts."

Until 2003, Baghdad was where most of Iraq's Christians lived. Now only a few remain. Almost daily explosions are a reminder of terrorist activity. When driving around the city, you see military and police checkpoints everywhere. There are walls topped with barbed wire protecting the buildings and churches against the blasts.

Many want to move somewhere more secure but others are being encouraged to stay.

"All are thinking about leaving or are preparing to leave Iraq," said Father Afram.

"People have nothing to do. They go to school or work and then go home. That's it. Some people tell me: 'You are giving us hope. You give us something that makes us happy again.' This church almost closed, but it is once again full," he said.

Father Martin, a priest who chose not to follow his family to the US but stay and help others displaced from the Nineveh plains by IS, has since transferred to Baghdad. He recently took his whole congregation to the site near a popular ice cream shop where IS suicide bombers killed 27 people. They went to show their solidarity with the victims, despite the danger.

A group of church leaders, who want to remain anonymous, think the future of Christianity in Baghdad may not lie with traditional Christians.

Muslim converts are 'future of church' in Iraq

"I believe the future of the church will be with the Muslims who now wish to convert to Christianity," said one.

"A Muslim who becomes a Christian has good faith and tells others about Christ. If the government would be open to this, our country would change. Many Muslims would become Christians, or atheists. But our constitution points to Islam as the first and best religion of our country."

Another leader said that about 45 per cent of their church came from a Muslim background.

"People are impressed that Christians come to them, show them love and support when they are from another religion. This is significant because their fellow Muslims fight and want to kill them.

"I recently heard the Patriarch say that emigration won't stop, but he also said that Christianity in Iraq won't stop either. He thought that those who remain will have a big impact on the society. I agree with the Patriarch. I think we should be optimistic about the future of the church. With IS, another pressure came upon us as Christians, but God uses this pressure."

"Iraq without a church? That will not happen," one leader said. "When you look at history, there has been persecution of the Church throughout the centuries. The Church has always come through the difficulties. We know that God is in charge and is leading."

Chaldean patriarchate calls for dialogue, justice and unity to rebuild Iraq after the Islamic State genocide

Three years after Mosul's fall, Patriarch Sako visited the area liberated by the Iraqi army and Peshmerga fighters. Reconstruction work is a "job opportunity" that can ensure "peace, security and stability". According to a recent report, 80 per cent of Christians have fled Syria and Iraq since 2011.

AsiaNews (12.06.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2s3M77A> – The primate of the Iraqi Church, Mar Louis Raphael Sako, issued a statement on the website of the Chaldean Patriarchate marking the third anniversary of the fall of Mosul to Jihadi militias.

In it, Mar Sako calls for "brave and responsible" dialogue to alleviate the suffering of those who lost their homes and property as a result of the rise of the Islamic State (IS) in northern Iraq. This requires "justice and equality" in the context of a "spirit of national unity" centred on the "public good" in accordance with the principles of the constitution.

The prelate mentioned again the "pain and tears" that Christians endure after fleeing their homes and land, a tragedy Iraqi Church leaders do not hesitate to call a genocide. Meanwhile, the slow and demanding process of reconstruction has just begun.

In expressing gratitude to those who played a role in the liberation of parts of Mosul and the Nineveh Plain, especially the Iraqi military and Kurdish Peshmerga, the patriarchate referred to displaced Christians as well as their torched or destroyed homes and churches.

The statement goes on to say that rebuilding housing and infrastructure provides a great opportunity to offer the country "peace, security and stability", and boost its unity, shaken by old and new autonomist tensions, including the demand by some Christians to set up an enclave in the Nineveh Plain, which the patriarch opposes, as well as the Kurdish independence referendum.

According to a recent report, up to 80 per cent of the original Christian population has left Iraq and Syria in recent years, due to war and escalating extremist Islamic movement. The trend began with the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, accelerated with the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011, and became a flood with the rise of the Islamic State in 2014 in northern Iraq.

Although it is difficult to come up with exact figures, it estimates that the number of Christians in Iraq has dropped from more than a million in 2003 to more than 300,000 in 2014 to between 200,000 and 250,000 at present. In Syria, the Christian population dropped to half from two million in 2011.

Iraqi and Syrian Christians are now losing hope for a safe future for them and that they no longer have enough reason to return. Some have found refuge in the region – especially

Lebanon and Jordan – often in a situation of precariousness. Others have left for Europe, the United States, Canada and Australia, the main countries of the diaspora.

What is more, higher cost of living, lack of working and education opportunities, destruction of Christian towns, and the loss of community are other factors that have contributed to the exodus.

This has led to a new appeal for justice and help for Christians, especially for those who have decided to stay at home and contribute to the reconstruction work.

This month marks the third anniversary of Mosul's occupation by Islamic State fighters. However, since last October, the Iraqi army has been engaged in an offensive with the support of Kurdish and Shia militias to retake the city.

The eastern parts of the city have been liberated, like almost the whole of Nineveh Plain, but there are still large pockets of resistance in western Mosul and the Old City. Fighting has already killed scores of civilians, often used as a human shield by the terrorists, and fueled an exodus of hundreds of thousands of people.

Last Thursday, Patriarch Sako visited the liberated areas of Mosul for the first time since the Islamic State seized the city. He was accompanied by his deputy, Mgr Basel Yaldo, and a delegation of politicians and military.

The prelate saw with his own eyes the situation of some of the city's most important Christian landmarks. One of the places he visited was Holy Spirit Parish, where Chaldean priest Fr Ragheed Ganni, and his three deacons were murdered in 2007.

During the visit (*pictured*), His Beatitude thanked the Iraqi armed forces for their fight against the Jihadi group and called for the protection of Christian towns in Nineveh Plain, including Bakhdida (Qaraqosh), Karemlash and Bartella.

Half of Syria and Iraq's Christians have left since 2011, says report

World Watch Monitor (06.06.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2seZcgT> - Three years to the day since the Islamic State group took control of the Iraqi city of Mosul, a new report estimates that 50-80% of the Christian populations of Iraq and Syria have emigrated since the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011.

The arrival of IS was only the "tipping point" of a trend already gathering pace as Christians experienced an "overall loss of hope for a safe and secure future", according to the report, produced by Christian charities Open Doors, Served and Middle East Concern.

The report also notes that for the Christians who have settled elsewhere, there is "little incentive" to return, with several interviewees saying "the Middle East is no longer a home for Christians".

In a policy paper released alongside the report, the three charities call on the EU to help establish an "accountability mechanism" to deal with incidents of religious and ethnic persecution and discrimination in Iraq and Syria.

"Creating a national accountability mechanism for grievances is a long-term solution which aims to restore faith in a system that ensures all religious and ethnic communities are

affirmed as equal citizens and deserving of protection, while also deterring negative actors from taking adverse actions against these communities," the charities write.

They urge the EU to "advocate for the establishment of the mechanism through its contacts with the Iraqi and Syrian governments" and to provide funding, technical support and monitoring. The mechanism, the charities add, "should be transparent and inclusive, ensuring all key stakeholders at all levels (government, community leaders, civil society and the public) are represented adequately".

Major findings

The report, 'Understanding the recent movements of Christians leaving Syria and Iraq', acknowledges the difficulty of producing definitive figures, as it estimates that the overall Christian population of Iraq has reduced from "well over 300,000" in 2014 to 200,000-250,000 today – "many" of whom are now displaced internally. In Syria, meanwhile, the charities estimate that the Christian population of around 2 million in 2011 has "roughly halved".

"Factors for leaving included the violence of conflict, including the almost complete destruction of some historically Christian towns in the Nineveh plains of northern Iraq, the emigration of others and loss of community, the rate of inflation and loss of employment opportunities, and the lack of educational opportunities," the report notes. "While direct violence, such as the movements of ISIS in both Iraq and Syria, was the tipping point for displacement, the ultimate decision to leave the countries was portrayed as an accumulation of factors over time."

A greater number of Christians are thought to have left Syria, but only because the initial population was higher, according to the report, which adds that a greater *proportion* of Iraq's Christians have left the country.

The Christians have emigrated via a range of routes, including resettlement programmes through churches, formal refugee registration and "illegal routes" – though the deaths of Christians trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Europe have reportedly "dissuaded some", while "the high price of these routes have made them unavailable for others".

Lebanon has reportedly taken in the most Christians, while thousands more have resettled in Jordan and Turkey, and a smaller number in European countries such as Sweden and Germany. However, "recent policy changes, as well as living conditions, have made arrival or staying in many of these countries, such as Sweden, incredibly difficult", the report concludes, adding: "There were reports of returns [home], but many expressed the sentiment that Christians have given up hope of returning."

However, the charities note that "many" of those who remain "want to play their part in rebuilding the shattered societies of Iraq and Syria. They want to be seen as Iraqi or Syrian citizens, enjoying the full rights of citizenship, such as equality before the law and full protection of their right to freedom of religion or belief, including the ability for everyone to freely worship, practise, teach, choose and change their religion. They are not calling for special privileges as a religious minority."

Iraq's Christians demand reconstruction of religious sites

By Wassim Bassem

Al-Monitor (21.05.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2rvUjQ9> - A new era has started in the northern Ninevah Plains, known for its ethnic and religious diversity, following the expulsion of the Islamic State (IS). IS took over the area in June 2014 and forced the Christians living there — estimated at more than 100,000 — to abandon their farms and towns and head to the neighboring Kurdistan Region and other areas in the country, or to leave Iraq altogether.

On May 16, the heads of the Christian churches told the media of their “concerns over the possible return of terrorism” and demanded that “the areas of the Ninevah Plains be protected by the United Nations and enjoy autonomy.” This fear, however, has not prevented many Christians from returning to their farms and cities and practicing religious rites in their monasteries and churches. During the Easter mass April 15 at the Mar Mattai Syriac Orthodox Monastery in Ninevah, Christians prayed for the safe return of the displaced to their homes and the spread of peace.

IS reduced several monasteries and churches to ruins, and Christians in the Ninevah Plains are demanding that plans be made for their reconstruction, especially for the monastery of Mar Behnam. It dates to the fourth century; IS occupied it in 2014 and bombed it in 2015. They are also calling for the reconstruction of the Mar Mattai Monastery, founded more than 1,600 years ago.

Yonadam Kanna, a Christian member of parliament, told Al-Monitor, “IS besieged the Mar Mattai Monastery in 2014 and prevented people from getting to it. So the first thing I did after the liberation of the Ninevah Plains was to restore the road leading to this monastery through the slopes of Mount Maklub, on top of which the monastery is built. [The monastery] extends over about 1 kilometer [0.6 miles] at a height of 2,400 meters [7,874 feet] above sea level.”

Kanna said, “The security forces along with some volunteers have started to remove the words engraved by IS on the walls of the monastery of Mar Behnam and other churches inciting the killing and displacement of Christians. The monks' rooms are being renovated after IS turned them into rooms for the detention of civilians. Crosses have also been raised [on the grounds].”

He added, “IS destroyed about 40% of the Mar Behnam Monastery; this calls for government support and funding to turn these sites again into places of worship and religious tourism centers. The government needs to develop a strategic program to restore Mar Behnam and Mar Mattai in conjunction with the return of visitors.”

However, Faleh al-Shammari, the director of antiquities in Ninevah, told Al-Monitor, “It is still premature to think of a strategic reconstruction project due to the war and the financial crisis.”

Still, he said, “Local volunteer teams have begun to remove the debris in the monasteries and churches and started to paint the facades of the Mar Behnam Monastery. The Directorate of Antiquities is preparing a special program to redevelop Mar Mattai Monastery, which is a historic site of interest to humanity and is frequented by visitors from all over the world.”

Shammari said, “Ecclesiastical organizations from Europe visited Mar Mattai Monastery this month and expressed their willingness to participate in the restoration of Christian monuments in the Ninevah Plains. In addition, during a UNESCO meeting last month in France held in the presence of the Iraqi minister of culture, an agreement was reached over the reconstruction of Mar Behnam and Mar Mattai.”

Shammari said, “The main objective is to have tourists from all over the world return to visiting these places like they used to before the IS invasion of Ninevah.”

Christian Bet-Nahrain Democratic Party leader Yousif Yacoub told Al-Monitor, "The government should swiftly reconstruct Mar Behnam Monastery in Qarqosh, which had been turned into a training camp by IS. It should also reconstruct the churches of Mosul that were turned into IS headquarters and the Mar Mattai Monastery, which was besieged after the historical road leading to it was threatened. These places have become a national symbol and not only a religious one; victory over IS will only be completed once these symbols are reconstructed."

Yacoub said, "The Christian institutions in Europe have to fund the reconstruction of these churches to maintain the Christian presence in the Middle East."

As for the role of the Christian Waqf Foundation, Media Director Hani Kasto told Al-Monitor, "The waqf formed committees to study the reconstruction projects of the Mar Mattai and Mar Behnam monasteries."

He added, "Before the start of the reconstruction process, it is the duty of the government to restore confidence in the hearts of the Christians in their homeland and state by focusing on strengthening security in the Ninevah Plains and reassuring the population that the state is strong and that terrorist and extremist organizations will no longer return to the region."

Yacoub said, "The security authorities reinforced security guard posts at the entrance to the Mar Mattai Monastery and reinforced security measures around Mar Behnam and the other churches. There are international promises to rebuild the churches in Ninevah. These promises remain within the context of symbolic support rather than real reconstruction projects."

So long as the extremist ideas planted by IS remain rooted in the behavior and beliefs of many people in the Ninevah Plains, the situation of the Christians in the area will be of concern, even amid tightened security measures.

Before the reconstruction of the monasteries, churches and places of worship in the Ninevah Plains, cultural and intellectual rehabilitation is required, so that a culture of moderation, coexistence and tolerance can emerge.

Following controversial video leak, Iraq minorities seek to address hate speech

By Saad Salloum

Al-Monitor (18.05.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2rOkWMU> - In undated footage that leaked earlier this month, head of the Shiite Endowment Alaa Abd al-Sahib al-Musawi is heard saying that non-Muslims have three options: take up jihad alongside Muslims, convert to Islam, or agree to pay jizyah — a yearly tax historically levied by Islamic states on Christians and Jews. The video sparked outrage on social media.

Subsequently, a group of 180 Christian families filed a lawsuit against Musawi, accusing him of spreading hatred against the minorities in the country.

Patriarch Mar Louis Raphael I Sako, head of the Chaldean Catholic Church in Iraq, issued a statement on May 5 to contain the anger sparked by the leaked video and alert religious leaders of their historic responsibility in such critical times in the nation's history. He urged the religious leaders to "adopt moderate and open-minded measures as well as ban hate and discriminatory speech." The patriarch clarified that hate speech "does not serve Islam."

Rather, it establishes walls among people, divides them, entrenches Islamophobia, dissolves the fabric of the nation, undermines peace, and violates freedom and human rights."

In his statement, Patriarch Sako stressed the important role played by the state, arguing that the absence of its authority leads to a breakout of destructive hatred: "We hereby call upon the government to enforce the law and work on respecting the religion of every human being pursuant to the legislation of the graceful Quranic verse that says: 'So whoever wills, let him believe; and whoever wills, let him disbelieve.'"

As angry reactions emerged, parliamentarians called for reform to integrate the religious endowments in Iraq with a civil administration in order to achieve unity, taking fully into consideration that "the position is held by a secular figure, and whoever is proved to have incited religious dispute or sectarian strife in the country is dismissed," according to the statement made May 12 by a representative from the parliamentarian Sadrist Al-Ahrar bloc.

Reactions to the leaked video unveiled some of the tension in Islamic-Christian relations as well as other religious minorities — tension that reached a critical stage after the Islamic State (IS) took over more areas of Iraq since June 2014, persecuted religious minorities and committed crimes against humanity, such as genocide in Sinjar as well as other areas in the governorate of Ninevah.

Ammar al-Hakim, head of the predominately Shiite National Alliance, invited leaders of Iraqi minorities in addition to Musawi for a meeting on May 17 to discuss and solve the issue. The meeting emphasized the necessity of stopping hate speech against all Iraqi groups.

In a conversation with Al-Monitor on how to confront the discourse of hatred, Patriarch Sako called for the establishment of a national council for religions or a national committee on religious dialogue through which united stands could be taken on the level of religious leadership "to avoid division and create a culture of dialogue of which we are in the direst need, especially in times as difficult as these, which are devastating the people of our nation."

Concerning Musawi, his conversation with Al-Monitor revealed that the video was from a theological lecture, which is "practically far from the present," as he was addressing the provisions of enslavement in Islam — which are "from the past and are no longer considered in the present." Musawi added that leaking the video was supported by parties that stand against establishing pillars of Islamic-Christian coexistence, especially after several Christian, Yazidi and other minority areas were freed from IS in a stand that seemed united against the extremist organization. Consequently, and according to Musawi, there is a suspicious purpose behind hindering the rebuilding of trust between components of a post-IS Iraq.

Musawi emphasized the positive development in relations between Muslims and the rest of the religious components after the Iraqi Delegation for Religions Dialogue, which he heads, visited Pope Francis in Rome. Musawi added that he thanked the pope for hosting the meeting with the high-level Iraqi delegation, and he addressed the pope, saying, "We are entrusted with the message of God, and such obligation necessitates that we preserve and protect this entrustment."

Meanwhile, the supreme Shiite cleric in Najaf, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, issued a statement calling for respecting the sanctity of Iraqi blood as well as the cessation of mutual violence in all its forms. He emphasized that Christian or Mandaean citizens should not be harmed, stressing his past stands, which go in line with the traditional Shiite clergy in Najaf.

Furthermore, Joseph Sliwa, a Christian member of parliament with the Warka Democratic bloc, told Al-Monitor that Christians appreciate the stand of Sistani, who always wishes Christians well on the Christmas and New Year holidays. However, Sliwa said Sistani also shoulders the most responsibility of prohibiting religious hate speech. Sliwa told Al-Monitor that the role of religious leadership is important, especially that of the supreme cleric in Najaf, so as to limit the effects of hate speech targeting the rights of religious minorities in Iraq such as Muslims, Yazidis, Mandaeans, Kakais, Baha'is and Zoroastrians. "When supreme clerics intervene to prohibit hate speech and discrimination on the grounds of religion, pluralism — which gradually turned absent in Iraq in the past few years — will be promoted," Sliwa said.

Any crisis may result in an opportunity to reform and rebuild trust, provided it is dealt with appropriately. Similarly, the current crisis may have underlying opportunities of reform, as happened when its underlying challenges threatened Shiite-Christian relations, thus promoting diversity management in a post-IS Iraq.

The crisis following the video leak, as well as the stands taken by religious and political leaders, emphasized the importance of formulating a state-sponsored national strategy to limit hate, as well as the importance of an agreement between Muslim and non-Muslim minority religious leaderships that would support such a strategy through a unified stand, as Iraqis pursue freeing another Nineveh district from the hands of IS.

ACN appeals to the international community for a "Marshall Plan" for Nineveh Plains

250 million dollars are needed for the rebuilding of almost 13,000 homes in the Nineveh Plains in Iraq. The pontifical foundation, Aid to the Church in Need (ACN), has called on every political, religious and humanitarian organization to join them in supporting the reconstruction program in the Nineveh Plains.

NRC (13.05.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2rliz4z> - Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) is embarking on a campaign for the reconstruction of the Christian villages in the Nineveh Plains, which were destroyed by the fighters of the so-called Islamic State. It will take an estimated 250 million dollars to rebuild the almost 13,000 private homes of Christian families that were burned, looted or even totally demolished by the occupying forces of IS. At the same time it will also be necessary to rebuild public and communal structures such as churches, schools and other educational centers.

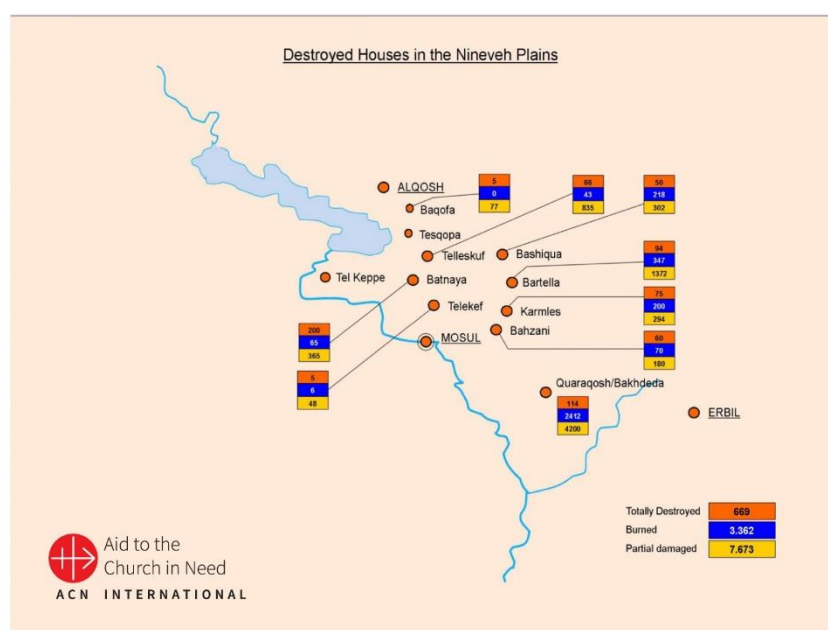
The executive president of ACN, Mr. Johannes Heereman von Zuydtwyck, is appealing to the entire international community: "We are confronting an enormous and historical challenge in defending the Christians and the other religious minorities in Iraq and in making it possible for them to return to their former homes, thereby re-establishing international rights. What is needed is an effort on the part of the entire international community, of every organization, whether religious, humanitarian or political, that is capable of supporting and promoting the reconstruction program on Nineveh Plains, together with ACN."

In order to be able to plan and oversee the reconstruction program, the "Nineveh Reconstruction Committee" (NRC), was established on 27 March this year in Erbil. It includes representatives of the three main Christian Churches in the area, the Syriac Orthodox Church, the Syriac Catholic Church and the Chaldean Catholic Church, plus three expert advisers nominated by ACN.

“It will take on average 7,000 dollars to repair a lightly damaged house, and 2,500 dollars to make one habitable”, explains Father Salar Boudagh, the vicar general of the Chaldean diocese of Alqosh and a member of the reconstruction committee. ACN has already made available half a million dollars for rebuilding the first batch of houses in the villages of Bartella, Karamless and Baghdeda (Qaraqosh), and on 8 May this year ACN formally opened the first three building sites in these villages for the first 105 houses of Christian families currently living as internal refugees (officially, “internally displaced persons”, or IDPs).

In the coming months, ACN will be knocking on the doors of governments, institutions and other humanitarian organizations, asking them to take part in the fundraising campaign.

More than 12,000 private homes on the Nineveh plains damaged by ISIS



Aid to the Church in Need (27.03.2017) - More than 12,000 private homes in twelve Christian villages on the Nineveh plains were damaged by the “Islamic State”. A total of 669 houses were completely destroyed. These were the findings of a study initiated by the pontifical foundation *Aid to the Church in Need*. According to the study, the costs for rebuilding will vastly exceed 200 million dollars.

As part of the study, 1,500 families who fled to Erbil from the affected regions were also asked whether they intended to return to the – now liberated – places they had come from. 1,308 of these responded.

41 per cent of the respondents indicated that they wanted to return to their native villages, 46 per cent said that they were considering it. In a survey also carried out by *Aid to the Church in Need* among 5,762 internally displaced persons in November 2016, only 3.28 per cent of the respondents wanted to return to their native villages; at that time, the

security situation in the liberated region was still fragile and combat operations were still ongoing.

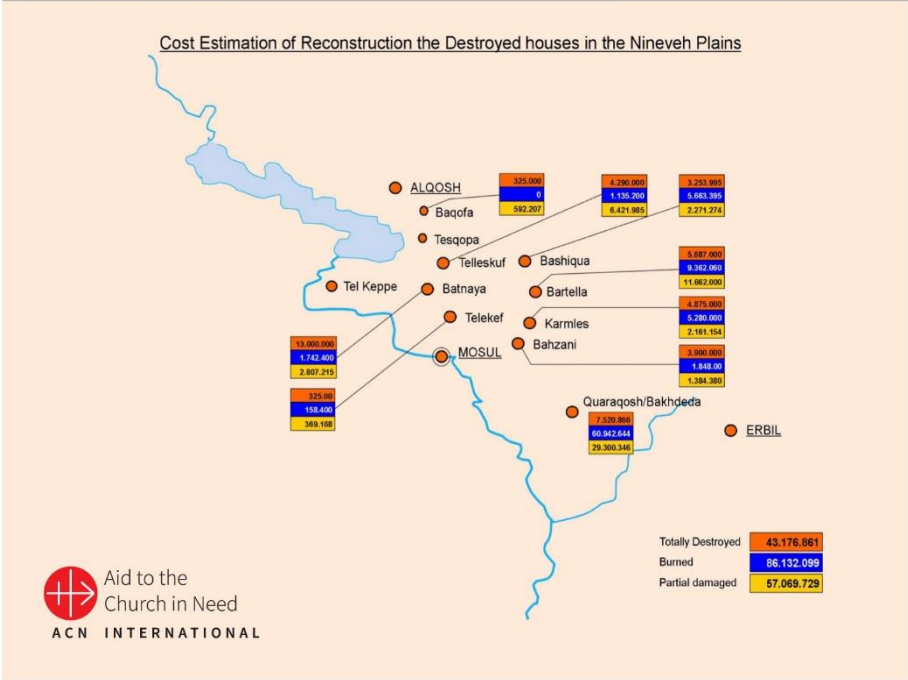
57 per cent of respondents reported that their possessions had been plundered, 22 per cent responded that their houses had been destroyed. The rest could not provide any information on the current condition of their houses and belongings. Slightly over a quarter (25.46 per cent) reported that their papers had been stolen by the terrorists of the Islamic State.

Currently, there are still 14,000 registered families who fled from Mosul and the Nineveh plains living in Erbil. This is approximately equal to 90,000 people, down from originally 120,000 in 2014. Of these, twelve thousand families continue to depend on humanitarian aid from *Aid to the Church in Need*.

The study, carried out by *Aid to the Church in Need* with the help of local church employees, consisted of three parts: first, the damages done to private homes by ISIS was ascertained. The findings of the investigation on the damages to social institutions such as schools and clinics as well as to church buildings will follow.

The evaluation and reconstruction process

In November 2016, Aid to the Church in Need agreed with the leaders of the 3 major Christian rites of the Nineveh Plains (Chaldean Catholic, Syriac Catholic and Syriac Orthodox) to hire teams of engineers who would be able to go village per village, house by house, and document the extent of damages, with the view of estimating the costs of repair.



In early February Aid to the Church in Need representatives went to Erbil and met with these engineers, who also showed them the satellite photography they had used, with the cooperation of the international alliance stationed in Erbil. These figures result from these studies.



Aid to the Church in Need has all the details that the engineers used, the same software and type of photos used to describe the damage. Reports are in English and in Arabic. The registers of all the families in need (the 90,000 people) is kept with the Chaldean Archbishop of Erbil and is always up to date (families come every week for the aid packages and amend the register when necessary).

In a historical first, the 3 rites have formed a joint Reconstruction Committee to be able to apply to the EU and other funding sources.

Reconstruction started on 6 February in Tel Skof, 170 families have already moved back. We are supporting them with the reconstruction of the school, which should be ready by the end of June, allowing the parents to register their children for the September new school year.

Iraqi families urged to return and rebuild homes in Nineveh Plains

World Watch Monitor (03.02.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2mLcS0F> - As the offensive against IS in western Mosul drives civilians out of the jihadists' last Iraqi stronghold, residents of towns already liberated are returning home with their expectations high – possibly too high.

The streets of one such town, Telskuf, now empty and quiet, shows signs of war. Some houses are riddled with bullet holes, others show little damage. IS fighters were expelled quickly from this Christian town, unlike the neighbouring town of Batnaya, which looks more like a warzone. Ninety per cent of its houses are reported to have been destroyed during the heavy fighting.

Nidal and Janan were two of the first people to return to Telskuf. The two sisters, with their husbands and six children, returned last month. The two men spend their days looking for work. Their house was ransacked but is liveable.

Since IS chased them out of the town in 2014 they had been living in the Kurdish town of Dohuk.

"We had water and electricity there, but it was not home. This place doesn't have all that, but it is home," says Nidal. She adds that she was getting depressed living as a displaced person: "Even when there was a birthday or a wedding, I wouldn't join the party. It felt wrong to celebrate."

The two families relied on emergency relief, surviving on food parcels distributed by local partners of the Christian charity Open Doors.

"That kept us alive and hopeful, and helped us to wait for better times," she says.

She points at her daughter playing a game on a phone in the corner of the room, saying: "And look, better times have come. Today I'm happier than ever. I'm home."

IS demolished the infrastructure in the towns it occupied, so until the power lines and water pipes are repaired, returnees depend on generators and trucks delivering fresh water.

Many Christian families from the Nineveh Plains have migrated to Western countries since 2014. This was not an option for Nidal.

"La!" (the Arabic word for "no") she says firmly. "We belong here. No way am I leaving this country. That is why we chose to return here as soon as we could – to show others it is possible, to set an example, and to motivate those who might be in doubt. By returning here we also give hope to our children, we show the new generation that they have a future in Iraq."

Though Nidal is eager to stay in Telskuf, life is not easy.

"There is no school for the children," she says. "My brother-in-law has to drive them to a town 15 minutes away every day. But the good news is that life goes on. Every day is new. We believe in Christ and He will help us through this period."

On 18 Feb. the Chaldean Catholic Patriarch of Baghdad, Louis Sako, visited Telskuf to give his blessing to the large cross resurrected there, and to take part in the first mass for two-and-a-half years to be held in the town's Saint George's Church. He says of the service, it is "the first spark of light shining in the cities of the Nineveh Plain since the darkness of ISIS".

The Patriarch adds that the cross announces to the world that "this is our land, we were born here and we will die here. Our ancestors were buried in this land and we are going to remain to preserve them with all our might for future generations. It is a sincere and great call to return and rebuild".

However, not everyone wants to return to towns like Telskuf.

Father Gabriel is head of the monastery in the Christian town of Alqosh and works alongside families returning to their towns in the Nineveh Plains. He has lived and worked on the front line during IS occupation.

He is happy that many Christians are safe now and returning home, "but the truth," he says, "is that many of them gave up hope".

Speaking during a visit to nearby Batnaya, he says: "There were 750 Christian families living here when IS came. Four hundred of them already left the country. The rest will have huge problems returning here. Look around you, everything is destroyed."

According to locals, Batnaya suffered more than any other during the intense fighting between IS and allied forces, when it was shelled and bombed for days.

Fr. Gabriel warns returnees not to expect things to return to normal now IS has gone.

"The liberation was just step one," he says. "The next step should be the protection of Christians. We can't do that ourselves; we need the help of the rest of the world. Like when Europe in the 20th Century needed the help of the world to cast out evil and to liberate and protect people – in the same way this region needs international protection now. IS may have been defeated; IS's ideas are still very much alive."

The priest hopes that, one day, the Nineveh Plain will be completely safe for Christians.

"We hope that the Church will be able to reunite its members worldwide," he says, "and that we can bring back those who went abroad to be one body again here in Iraq."

Russia conquering the hearts and minds of Christians in the Middle East?

Lavrov: The European Union avoids the discussion on the problems of Christians in the Middle East, putting itself under the infamous mask of 'political correctness'

HRWF (28.01.2017) - Speaking at the 25th edition of the International Christmas Education, being held in Kremlin, Foreign minister of Russia Sergey Lavrov made reference to the alarm and concern caused in the Middle East also from "cruel suffering" and the "deliberate destruction" inflicted on the Christian communities in the region. "Unfortunately - added Lavrov - the European Union avoids the discussion on the problems of Christians in the Middle East, putting itself under the infamous mask of 'political correctness'."

Lavrov voiced concerns over "cruel harassment and well-targeted killing of the Christian population in the Middle East and the destruction of the world heritage sites."

Russia and its partners hold annual events devoted to protecting Christians in the framework of the UN Human Rights Council, he said.

At least 100 places of worship have been vandalized or completely demolished in the territories of Mosul and Nineveh Province since June 2014, when the jihadists of the Islamic State (Daesh) imposed their rule in that region. This is what Mariwan Naqshbandi, spokesman for the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Autonomous Region of Iraqi Kurdistan reports, anticipating the contents of a report to be published by the Commission on crimes committed by militiamen of Daesh in Mosul and in the Nineveh Plain when they had control of that area.

In the document - said the Kurdish spokesman, according to local sources consulted by Agenzia Fides - it is highlighted that most of the destroyed or damaged religious sites are Christian churches, along with a number of Yazidi temples or belonging to other religious minorities. The Commission on crimes committed by Daesh - added Mariwan Naqshbandi - collects information thanks to the contribution of the Kurdish Peshmerga troops that contribute to the liberation war against the Islamic State, and is committed to also collecting data on violence against women - especially yazide - during the jihadist occupation.

Patriarch of Moscow Kirill invited in Syria

Agenzia Fides (14.01.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2lvp5XI> - Scholars and official representatives of Syrian Islam, together with the Syrian Ministry officials for endowments and religious affairs (waqf), sent an invitation to the Patriarch of Moscow Kirill to visit the country. The news was given by the Russian media, reporting that the invitation was sent to the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church through the Mufti of Moscow Albir Krganov, who recently led the visit to Syria of a Russian Islamic delegation. In the program of a possible trip to Syria Patriarch Kirill - added Krganov, who is also a member of the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation, an institution aimed at "protecting the rights and freedoms of citizens" and to encourage the growth of Russian civil society - would certainly include a visit to Maalula, a Christian village where people still speak Aramaic, occupied twice by the jihadi militias of al Nusra Front between 2013 and 2014.

The Russian Islamic representative also reported that the creation of an interfaith Foundation under the aegis of the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation, to be used as a tool to convey humanitarian aid in Syria, is being studied.

The Patriarchate of Moscow continues to strengthen its ties with the Orthodox Churches of the Middle East, also giving its material resources. Already in August 2013 the donation of one million and 300 thousand dollars arrived from the Russian Orthodox Church to the Patriarchate of Antioch in order to help the people overwhelmed by the conflict.

Patriarch Kirill, also accompanied by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, had already been received by President Assad in Damascus on November 13, 2011, when the revolt of the opposition groups had begun a few months before. During that meeting, Assad had praised Syria as "an example of peaceful coexistence of different religious communities". (GV) (Agenzia Fides 14/01/2017)

Iraqi Christians reduced to self-help and self-financing? (*)

Agenzia Fides (27.01.2017) - On January 26, a delegation of the Chaldean Church led by Patriarch Raphael Louis Sako I visited the area of the Nineveh Plain recently reconquered by the government army, also welcomed by local political representatives. In Telkaif, in the church of the Sacred Heart, the Chaldean Patriarch led a moment of prayer to invoke the gift of peace in the entire region and the prompt return of refugees to their homes.

The Chaldean Patriarchate reports that committees have been set up and the first funds have been allocated - by the Chaldean Patriarchate and individual dioceses in Iraq - for a total of nearly 500 million Iraqi dinars (equivalent to more than 380 thousand euro), in order to accelerate the recovery of homes and churches damaged or destroyed during the years of jihad occupation, and therefore allow the return of those who wish to return to their homes, abandoned between June and August 2014 before the advancing of the self-proclaimed Islamic Caliphate militia.

The message issued yesterday by the media of the Patriarchate, appeals to the generosity of parishes and Chaldean communities scattered around the world to take charge of the financial support for the reconstruction and reinstatement projects of the living conditions in the liberated cities of the Nineveh Plain. According to data provided by the Patriarchate, and sent to Agenzia Fides, the first reconnaissance showed that Batnaya is the most devastated town during the jihadi occupation, and then during the fighting that led to the expulsion of the caliphate militias. Other cities, such as Tesqopa and the same Telkaif, suffered less damage.

In Telkaif (see Fides 25/01/2017) government troops, when they regained control of the city, found a 60-year-old Christian woman, Georgette Hanna, who in August 2014 was not able to escape along with the other members of her family, and since then had found refuge with a family of Muslim neighbors, who took care of her. (GV) (Agenzia Fides 27/01/2017)

(*) The title is from Human Rights Without Frontiers

Christians 'excluded' from Iraq's reconstruction plans

See the 88-page Report "Ensuring Equality" published by 16 NGOs at

World Watch Monitor (27.01.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2k1HyXx> - Christians are being excluded from the reconstruction plans for northern Iraq, further eroding the likelihood of their return once Islamic State has been militarily defeated there, an alliance of UK-based charities has warned.

Iraqi Christians firmly believe that Iraq is their spiritual homeland; their presence dates back at least to the 3rd Century. Before 2003, there were approximately 1.5 million Christians in Iraq, but estimates now range from 200,000 to 500,000. Approximately 70% of Iraq's Christians are from the Chaldean Catholic tradition, while the remainder are Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Armenian and Protestant.

After the Allied invasion of Iraq, many Christians fled the Baghdad area for the north, where some towns (such as Qaraqosh) had been almost 95% Christian before 2003. It's estimated that at the time Mosul was invaded by Islamic State in June 2014, only about 3,000 Christians were left from the 35,000 there in 2003.

Now the UK coalition of mainly Christian charities working in Iraq and Syria says it's "clear" that leaders of religious minority communities are being excluded from the National Settlement plan being put together by Iraq and other regional powers and presented to the UN.

The 88-page report, *Ensuring Equality*, which brought together contributions from 16 NGOs, adds that it is vital that Christians and other minority populations have support for their political and security concerns if they are to feel reassured enough to return to Mosul or the surrounding Nineveh Plains region, rebuild their communities and undertake any reconciliation process.

"This must include full citizenship status and the rebuilding of churches and community centres," says the report.

Participating charities have repeated the oft-reported claim that Christians are not being supported by the international donor institutions, such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and are having to rely on churches that are trying to run their own aid programmes with limited funds.

The NGOs who contributed include Aid to the Church in Need, the Assyrian Church of the East Relief Fund, the Syrian Network for Human Rights, Syrian Christians for Peace, the Evangelical Christian Alliance Church in Lebanon and the Alliance Church of Jordan.

"All the NGOs involved in this report state that the vast majority of Christians and other 'minorities' avoid UNHCR camps and facilities because of continuing discrimination and persecution," the report says, adding: "It is utterly unacceptable that a place of sanctuary should be a place of fear that repels those it is designed to save and protect."

However, it says that those who remain outside UNHCR camps "have fared ... unequally in the allocation of international aid, funding, political support, media attention, and asylum placements".

The report urges the UNHCR to scrap its "need not creed" approach and acknowledge minorities' particular experiences. It calls on the UNHCR to open more mobile registration units to enable asylum-seekers outside UN camps – who tend to be non-Muslims – to register. It also urges the UNHCR to employ more non-Muslim registration and security staff, and translators, to reduce discrimination against non-Muslims.

It recommends that Western governments giving aid should promote tolerance of minorities by objecting to materials or media outlets that promote extremism, and says the UNHCR should give converts from Islam to Christianity urgent protection, because they "face a high risk of assassination – even at the hands of fellow migrants in Europe".

The report also recommends that the Balkan states that have expressed a desire to take Christian refugees as part of their "EU allocation" should be helped to do so. "At present this is being undermined by pressure and threats from Germany and the dead hand of political correctness," it claims.

A similar call for more international aid was issued this week by a 14-member delegation of church leaders, who visited Baghdad and Erbil. The group, brought together by the World Council of Churches, met officials from the Baghdad and Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the UN. After a briefing from the UN Humanitarian Co-ordinator in Iraq, Rev. Frank Chikane, moderator of the WCC's Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, said: "The international donor support is woefully inadequate to meet the continuing need, leaving the host communities and the KRG to carry the burden on their own."

In the Kremlin, the Russian Foreign Minister on Wednesday (25 Jan.) accused the European Union of "avoid[ing] the discussion on the problems of Christians in the Middle East [by] putting itself under the infamous mask of political correctness".

Meanwhile the Al-Monitor news website reported last month that the viability of the project for Iraqi national reconciliation, outlined in December in the "national settlement" document, is threatened by its exclusion of the country's minority populations, such as its Assyrian Christians.

One of Iraq's few Christian MPs, Yonandam Kanna, secretary-general of the Assyrian Democratic Movement, told the website that the settlement did not include any clause determining the fate of disputed minority areas, control of which is sought by Arab Iraq and the semi-autonomous Kurdish region – such as the Nineveh Plains for the Christians and Shabaks.

He added: "Minorities do not have a say in this and they are not even allowed to determine their own fate. The settlement does not take into account the views of Christians or Yazidis, or any other less influential minority groups."

Mr. Kanna has previously criticised the national reconciliation projects put forward by the larger political groups for failing to provide guarantees that people who have committed atrocities against minorities, such as Yazidis and Christians, would be brought to justice.

Another Christian Iraqi MP told a conference in Washington DC last summer that the Iraqi Parliament "does not take minorities into account".

Global charity Open Doors, with others, has produced a detailed report on the vital contribution that Christians make in Iraq (and Syria). The report's co-ordinator Rami* (not his real name) said: "We need recognition for the vital role of the Church in rebuilding and reconciliation... Maintaining the presence of Christians is not only about them; it is for the good of society as a whole. In the reports and research we've conducted, we have mapped, in a way, all the contributions Christians have given to Iraq."

The report begins: "When Christianity spread across what we now call the Middle East and we see that since then until now Christians have contributed to societies in literacy, in health, in translating and contributing to the Arabic language. Some of the best early centres of learning in the world were founded by Christians. Christians were among the first to introduce charitable works and NGOs. We see them involved in politics, and in the development of the Iraqi state. Christians are among the most well-known business people. And in the future Christians, alongside other numerical minorities, are vitally important for the stability of [Iraq]. Policy-makers and researchers agree that we need to maintain

diversity in order to counter extremism and radicalisation. We need diversity to ensure sustainable peace and lasting stability in the Middle East.”

The way that Open Doors is tackling these issues, Rami told World Watch Monitor in November, involves working with indigenous church leaders, engaging with governments and decision-makers across the globe, and trying to collect One Million Voices in a petition in support of a campaign to bring “Hope to the Middle East”.